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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002857

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SHEIKH ALLIANCE ASKS U.S. TO BROKER A MEETING WITH GULF STATES

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2595

1B. BAGHDAD 2447

Classified By: Team Leader Brad Lynch for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(U) This is a Muthanna PRT reporting cable.

Summary

11. (S/REL MCFI) Two tribal leaders who represent a nascent nationalist, cross-sectarian political movement continued their dialogue with Senior Advisor Gordon Gray about their motives, Iranian influence, and the need for U.S. financial support. When informed that the U.S. could not sponsor or finance individual parties or candidates, they shifted approach, asking the U.S. to broker a meeting with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or the United Arab Emirates. Gray declined, emphasizing that at a time when the U.S. is encouraging other nations to engage with the Government of Iraq and establish diplomatic missions in Iraq, brokering a meeting of this sort would send a conflicting message. The sheikhs noted that the leading Iraqi Shi'a parties and Iran have taken an interest in this tribal movement and are attempting to lure the leaders into their camps. End summary.

&We have a good horse, but it needs backing.8

12. (C/REL MCFI) During a September 2 follow-up meeting with Gray at the PRT (earlier contacts in reftel), Sheikhs Hakim Khazal Khashan (Muthanna) and Ali Munshid (Dhi Qar) emphasized that the main purpose of their political movement is to maintain the integrity of the Iraqi Arab nationalist movement. "We want to empower the tribes and involve them in the political process. Their role is very important, and it may be the only way to keep Iraq united and protect us against Jaysh al-Mahdi and Iran." At this point, however, the nascent alliance claims that it is out of cash and requires financial backing in order to continue. The sheikhs conceded that a planned August 24 political meeting of nationalist southern (Shi'a) and western (Sunni) tribal sheikhs in Ramadi -- to be coordinated with prominent Anbar sheikh Abu Risha -- was postponed indefinitely, in part over a question of whether to invite Prime Minister Maliki. (Comment: The postponement of a planned organizing session with better-funded Sunni sheikhs may have contributed to their sense of financial urgency. End comment.)

ISCI, Da'wa, and Iran ready to place bets

13. (C/REL MCFI) The leading Shi'a parties in the south recognize the importance of tribal organizations in Iraq and are targeting them with offers of support, which these sheikhs have rejected. According to Ali Munshid, he has recently been approached by both ISCI's Dhi Qar representative and a Da'wa envoy sent by Prime Minister Al-Maliki. The former offered to help establish and equip

their offices, and the latter invited them to join Da,wa. In Hakim's words, &It would be easier, more profitable, and safer for us to join the religious parties, but we have chosen not to do this.⁸ They also claimed that overtures to tribal leaders are being made by Iranian interests, but did not give specific details about recruiting. In several instances, the sheikhs, especially Munshid, spoke of Iraqi religious parties (especially ISCI) and Iranian intelligence interests interchangeably.

U.S. support requested

¶4. (C/REL MCFI) Although informed during previous meetings that the U.S. supports a democratic political process and not individual candidates or parties, the sheikhs, opening bid was for U.S. financial assistance. They believe that their objectives are well aligned with U.S. interests and, unlike the elected government, immune to Iranian influence. In Hakim,s words, "We don,t have a religious ideology, and there is no risk of outside influence." They also reported that there is a spirited debate among tribal alliance members regarding Iran,s offers of financial assistance. Some believe that they should work with "the devil" now and deal with him later, once they are established in a position of power. Others feel that this is a dangerous game to play.

¶5. (C/REL MCFI) When the sheikhs realized that direct U.S. support would not be forthcoming, they shifted to their backup request, that the U.S. broker a meeting with a third party. Referring to the Gulf states, Hakim said, "We share the same problem (Iran), and they will be next. Iraq is on

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the front line; if we fall, they will fall." Gray explained that the U.S. is working to convince regional governments to engage with the Government of Iraq and to establish diplomatic missions in Iraq and to work with the democratically elected government. Brokering a meeting such as this would send a contradictory message to those nations.

Comment

¶6. (S/REL MCFI) Iraqi religious parties understand that a tribal coalition could be either a valued ally or a formidable opponent, so the sheikhs are likely correct in their assertions that Iran has identified Shi'a tribal leaders as important targets to influence. The recruitment battle for sheikhs has a high potential for violence, and both Hakim and Ali Munshid expressed concern for their personal security. They claimed that an Iranian intelligence organization document published in mid-August identified Ali Munshid and two unnamed sheikhs as assassination targets because they are threatening Iran,s influence in the area. Muthanna,s governor was assassinated about this time last year for what most believe to have been his refusal to cooperate with Iran, so the sheikhs' concern is understandable. End comment.

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